



Speech in the European Parliament Plenary Session

As delivered

Ursula von der Leyen
President-elect of the European Commission

Strasbourg
27 November 2019

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Mr President, Honourable Members,

Today, the 27th of November and exactly 30 years ago, the clock strikes twelve.

Church bells ring. Sirens blare. Workers down tools. Factories, mines and shops empty as the streets fill up with dance and hope.

The historic two-hour general strike in the middle of the **Velvet Revolution** saw people from Prague to Bratislava take part in a beautiful, peaceful wave of freedom, courage and unity.

For me, these two hours go to the heart of what the European Union has always meant.

It is not only about parties and politics, rules or regulations, markets or currencies.

It is ultimately – and above all else – about people and their aspirations.

It is about people standing together. For their liberty, for their values, simply for a better future.

There is one quote from the great Václav Havel – one of the heroes of 1989 – that stands out for me when I look ahead to the future. He said:

“Work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.”

I choose this quote, because over the next five years, our Union will embark together on a transformation which will touch every part of our society and of our economy.

And we will do it, because it is the right thing to do. Not because it will be easy.

We sometimes forget that our greatest achievements have always come when we are bold.

We were bold when we sought peace where there was pain.

We were bold when we created a single market and a single currency.

We were bold when we welcomed part of our European family that had been out in the cold for too long.

But in the last years, we had to focus on the here-and-now, managing crises after emergency, fighting to keep our unity and solidarity intact.

If we have emerged stronger in that time – and I believe we have – it is in great part thanks to the leadership and the conviction of my predecessor **Jean-Claude Juncker, a great European. He has devoted his heart, his soul and his life to our Union and his legacy speaks for itself.**

Jean-Claude, from all of us, thank you!

Honourable Members,

Four months ago, you placed your trust in me. Since then, I have met all the political groups and all the Heads of State or Government.

Together we have built an outstanding European team. You, the Members of Parliament, scrutinised each and every one of us during the hearings.

I promised I would listen to you. And this is exactly what I have done. And it is what I will continue to do, together with Maroš Šefčovič and all the other Members of the Commission. We have agreed on many things and yes, sometimes, we disagreed, too. But this is democracy at work.

Today, here at the heart of this European democracy, I am asking for your support for a fresh start for Europe.

Honourable Members,

The team you are voting on today comes from different cultures, countries and has different backgrounds and political colours.

We have teachers and farmers, mayors and ministers, doctors and diplomats, engineers and entrepreneurs.

We have those born before the Berlin Wall was built and those born after it was torn down. Those who lived in dictatorships and those who helped young democracies join our Union.

It is a team with almost as many women as men – only one woman away from gender balance. This shows we have made real progress, but also that we still have more to do.

As the first woman to be President of the Commission, every Member of my College will have a gender-balanced Cabinet – *for the very first time*. And by the end of our mandate, we will have gender equality at all levels of management – *for the very first time*.

This will change the face of the Commission.

Every Member of my team will bring their own personal stories and perspectives on Europe. They will have their own policies and priorities to manage.

But **all together, we will be one team that works in the common European interest.** We will be one team that works with this House and with Member States to tackle our generation's defining challenges.

We are ready. But most importantly, Europe is ready.

My message is simple: Let us get to work.

Honourable Members,

This is an unsettled world, where too many powers only speak the language of confrontation and unilateralism. But it is also a world where millions of people are taking to the streets – to protest against corruption or to demand democratic change.

The world needs our leadership more than ever. To keep engaging with the world as a responsible power. To be a force for peace and for positive change.

We must show our partners at the United Nations that they can rely on us, as a champion of multilateralism.

We must demonstrate to our friends in the Western Balkans that we share the same continent, we share the same history, we share the same culture – and we will share the same destiny too. Our door remains open.

We also share the same destiny with our transatlantic partners.

Yes, we have issues – without any doubt. But our ties have lasted the test of time. While we are speaking, thousands of students, researchers, entrepreneurs, artists continue to build *zillions* of friendships, business contacts, and science projects.

This myriad of fine threads woven together make a bond that is stronger than any individual point of discord.

Countries from East to West, from South to North, need Europe to be a true partner. **We can be the shapers of a better global order.**

This is Europe's vocation. And it is what European citizens want.

I am happy to have such an experienced diplomat as Josep Borrell on our team, working alongside Jutta Urpilainen, Olivér Várhelyi and Janez Lenarčič. They will do an invaluable job together.

We will invest in alliances and coalitions to advance our values. We will promote and protect Europe's interests through open and fair trade. We will strengthen our partners through cooperation, because strong partners make Europe strong too.

My Commission will not be afraid to speak the language of confidence. But it will be our way, the European way.

This is the geopolitical Commission that I have in mind, and that Europe urgently needs.

Honourable Members,

If there is one area where the world needs our leadership, it is on protecting our climate. This is an existential issue for Europe – and for the world.

How can it not be existential when 85% of people in extreme poverty live in the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change?

How can it not be existential when we see Venice under water, Portugal's forests on fire, or Lithuania's harvests cut by half, because of droughts?

This has happened before without any question, but never with that frequency and with that intensity.

We do not have a moment to waste on fighting climate change. The faster Europe moves, the greater the advantage will be for our citizens, our competitiveness and our prosperity.

The European Green Deal is a must for the health of our planet and our people – and for our economy.

Frans Timmermans is the right person to make this happen. And I am delighted that he will be supported by Kadri Simson, Adina Vălean and many others.

The European Green Deal is our new growth strategy. It will help us cut emissions while creating jobs.

At the core of it will be an industrial strategy that enables our businesses – big and small – to innovate and to develop new technologies while creating new markets. We will be global standard setters. This is our competitive advantage. And it is the best way to ensure a level-playing field.

But all of this has to serve the European people.

They want and expect Europe to act on climate and environment. But they also need affordable, clean and secure energy. They need to be skilled to work in the jobs of tomorrow. They need to commute to those new jobs or to be connected from home. And we have to make sure that those needs are fulfilled in a sustainable way.

It is a generational transition towards climate neutrality by mid-century. **But this transition must be just and inclusive – or it will not happen at all.**

It will need massive investment in innovation, research, infrastructure, housing, and the training of people. It will require public and private investments – at the European and at national levels.

And once again, Europe is already leading the way. The European Union will mainstream climate financing throughout its budget, but also throughout capital markets and the entire investment chain.

In regions that will have to make a bigger step than most, we will support people and businesses with a targeted just transition mechanism. It will cut across different funds and instruments and attract the private investment we need.

To help us achieve this, the European Investment Bank will be a trusted partner. I am particularly happy that the progress it has made to strengthen its role as European climate bank is obvious. This will boost investment in European technologies and solutions the world is looking for.

But there is more to do.

We only account for approximately 9% of global emissions. We have to bring the world with us and this is already happening.

From China to Canada, through to California, others are working with us on their own Emissions Trading Systems. And Phil Hogan will ensure that our future trade agreements include a chapter on sustainable development.

Because we know: Climate change is about all of us. We have the duty to act and the power to lead.

Honourable Members,

Digitalisation is making things possible that were unthinkable even a generation ago.

Communicating with one another worldwide, access to information, progress in medicine, environmental protection, mobility, inclusion: there is no future without digitalisation. And Margrethe Vestager is the one to lead us on this journey to the future.

We will automate work that is wearisome for us humans: carrying heavy loads, performing repetitive tasks in factories or in offices.

And this will give us time. Time for what distinguishes human beings. Time for what computers can't do: *empathy and creativity*.

A care robot can help lift patients and make beds and digitalisation can help with administrative tasks. This will allow nursing staff to have time to do what is really important: to talk with their patients, *to be there for them*.

Digitalisation will enable us to handle resources more effectively and more efficiently, because we will be able to calibrate everything precisely: water consumption, energy, all the precious resources of our planet.

Digitalisation will change our society, our economy, our administration - root and branch. It is already doing so.

To grasp the opportunities and to address the dangers that are out there, we must be able to strike a smart balance where the market cannot. We must protect our European well-being and our European values. **In the digital age, we must continue on our European path.**

In concrete terms:

First, we must have mastery and ownership of key technologies in Europe. These include quantum computing, artificial intelligence, blockchain, and critical chip technologies.

To do this, to close the gaps that exist now, we must act together. Let us pool our resources, our money, our research capacity, our knowledge. And let us put this into practice.

We have done it, for instance, with the supercomputer. Europe is currently in the process of acquiring one of the three most powerful computers on the world market. But the next generation of supercomputers must be built by us.

Second, Europe has all the scientists and all the industrial capabilities it needs to be competitive in these areas. Let's not talk ourselves down.

Innovation needs brains. But it also needs diversity, it needs space to think. We have all that here in Europe. People want to live here, want to do research here, want to shape the future here.

Third, we need infrastructure fit for the future, with common standards, gigabit networks, and secure clouds of both current and next generations.

Fourth, the raw material of digitalisation is data. With every click we feed the algorithms that then influence our own behaviour.

With the General Data Protection Regulation we set the pattern for the world. We have to do the same with artificial intelligence. Because in Europe we start with the human being. It is not about damming up the flow of data. It is about making rules that define how to handle data responsibly.

For us the protection of a person's digital identity is the overriding priority.

Fifth, we also want innovation. Today, 85% of all non personal data is never used at all. This is a waste.

We must make use of the knowledge that is hiding within this unused data. We must establish a framework to enable governments and companies to share data and to pool it securely. I cannot imagine anyone better able to develop such a data strategy than Thierry Breton.

Sixth, cyber security and digitalisation are two sides of the same coin. This is why cyber security is a top priority.

For the competitiveness of European companies **we have to have stringent security requirements and a unified European approach**. We have to share our knowledge of the dangers. We need a common platform, we need an enhanced European Cybersecurity Agency. That is the only way we can strengthen trust in the connected economy and boost resilience to dangers of all kinds.

We can do all this if we act together, if we build on our European values. And by doing so I am confident that Europe will play a leading role in the digital age.

Europe can do it!

Honourable members,

Europe has a lot to be proud of.

We are the world's trading superpower. We rank first globally in exporting manufactured goods and services. We are the largest source and destination of foreign direct investment anywhere in the world.

Our industry is world class in high value sectors, for instance making a third of the world's space satellites. And our companies are at the cutting edge, holding 40% of the world's renewable technology patents.

We should harness this transformative power of the twin digital and climate transition to strengthen our own industrial base and innovation potential.

This can only be done through investment.

Honourable Members, we have to scale-up. For years, we have invested less in innovation than our competitors do. This is a huge handicap to our competitiveness and our ability to lead this transformation.

This is why we should not see the next Multiannual Financial Framework as a simple accounting exercise. The world seven years ago looks nothing like the world in seven years' time. **Our budget must be significantly modernised.**

I know that in this field, I cannot only rely on the experience and skill of Johannes Hahn, but also on this Parliament.

But public budgets can only go so far. We must make sure that investment can flow to where it is needed by completing the Capital Markets Union. This will help improve access to finance for small businesses and start-ups to let them grow, innovate and take the risks they need.

And the same goes for the Banking Union. We have to complete it in order to make our financial system stronger and more resilient.

I have entrusted this task to Valdis Dombrovskis, the right person for the right job. He will make sure our economy works for people. Quality jobs, equal opportunities, fair working conditions and inclusion. He knows that we need sound public finances for sustainable growth.

And he will drive our competitiveness and our sustainability. They go hand-in-hand.

We should never forget that competitive sustainability has always been at the heart of our social market economy.

We just called it differently.

Think of the family-owned businesses all across our European Union. They were not built solely on shareholder value or the next bonuses. They were built to last, to pass down generations, to provide a fair living to employees. They were built on passion for quality, tradition and innovation.

The things we make today may have changed. But we must rediscover our competitive sustainability, dear friends here in this House.

It was in this spirit that each and every Member State committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. And it is in this spirit that Paolo Gentiloni will oversee the implementation of the Goals. He believes in it and I believe in him.

The European economy has recovered from one of the worst economic and financial crises since the end of the Second World War. The labour market remains strong and unemployment continues to fall.

However, with clouds forming on the horizon, Europe should prepare for what is ahead. We need to rely on what makes us strong: our single market, our single currency.

It is high time to complete our Economic and Monetary Union to deliver growth and jobs by increasing macroeconomic resilience. We must use the flexibility allowed under the Stability and Growth Pact to give the time and the space for our economies to grow.

And at the same time, we must support Member States with targeted investments and structural reforms. I cannot think of a better person to lead this work than Elisa Ferreira.

Honourable Members,

Last month, 39 people lost their lives in the back of a lorry, after having been trafficked through at least four European countries.

It is a tragedy that a mother in Vietnam receives a message from her daughter in Europe that she does not have room to breathe.

For those 39 people. For their mothers, fathers, and friends: We all agree that this should never ever happen.

People expect Europe to find common solutions to the shared challenge of migration. This is an issue that has divided us, but we should step forward. We need solutions that work for all.

This is the task that I have entrusted to Margaritis Schinas and Ylva Johansson. With their different skills and perspectives, they will form a formidable team.

Honourable Members, one thing is for sure:

Europe will always provide shelter to those who are in need of international protection.

And it is in our interest that those who stay are integrated in our society.

But we also have to ensure that those who have no right to stay return home.

We have to break the cruel business model of smugglers.

We must reform our asylum system, never forgetting our values of solidarity and responsibility.

We need to strengthen our external borders to allow us to return to a fully functioning Schengen. We need to invest in our partnerships with countries of origin to improve conditions and create opportunities.

It will not be easy – but, let us remember the words of Václav Havel: *It is the good thing to do.*

Migration will not go away – it will stay with us.

Therefore, I think **a Europe that is so proud of its values and so proud of its rule of law has to be able to come up with an answer that is both humane and effective.** We should be able to do that.

And the same team of Margaritis Schinas and Ylva Johansson will also be responsible for strengthening our internal security.

They will ensure that law enforcement cooperation can deal with new and emerging threats. And they will make sure that Europol, our best tool to fight crime, is fit for purpose.

Honourable Members,

When I was a girl, living in Brussels, my little sister died of cancer at the age of 11. I remember the utter helplessness of my parents – but also of the medical staff who looked after her with such care.

Every one of us has a similar story – or knows someone who has. The number of cancer cases are rising, but we are getting better at diagnosis and treatment.

Europe will take the lead in the fight against cancer.

Early next year, Stella Kyriakides, will launch an ambitious cancer plan. She is the right person to make sure that Europe's Beating Cancer Plan helps to reduce the suffering caused by this disease.

The point is that Europe needs to care for the things people care about.

People care about the future of our children and our society.

Culture and education are what link our history with our future. This is what makes us unique. Our soul, our culture, our diversity, our heritage.

And I know that with Mariya Gabriel, it is in safe hands. This is why I am happy to announce that her portfolio will be renamed Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth.

People care about fairness and equality in every sense of the word.

This is why I chose Nicolas Schmit to be in charge of implementing our European Pillar of Social Rights and fighting poverty from childhood onwards. He will put forward a framework to ensure that every worker in our Union has a fair minimum wage.

And Helena Dalli will be the champion we need to break through the glass ceilings. Those barriers holding people back because of who they are, what they believe and who they love. These barriers have to disappear! Period.

People care about their rights, values and freedoms.

The rule of law is our foundation and can never be compromised. We must ensure that it is respected and upheld everywhere, with every country treated equally.

We must focus on dialogue and prevention, but never hesitate to take all necessary measures. We need experience and engagement. And Věra Jourová and Didier Reynders are the right people exactly for that.

People care about the air they breathe, the water they drink, the food they eat and the nature they cherish.

We can all be happy that Virginijus Sinkevičius will be leading Europe's fight to preserve our biodiversity and oceans, while ensuring our coastal and fishing communities can thrive.

And we have Janusz Wojciechowski who will ensure that our farmers can also thrive as they adapt to new realities.

The twin transitions – climate and digitalisation – will bring changes for all, but let there be no doubt: **Farming will remain a valued part of our culture and our future.**

We need a sustainable farm to fork strategy. From capital access to young farmers to the fact that imported food products from third countries must comply with the European Union's environmental standards.

And people care about having a say in their future.

The turnout in this year's European election was the highest in a quarter of a century. But democratic participation does not stop on election day.

We will mobilise Europe's best energies from all parts of our Union, from all institutions, from all walks of life, to engage in the Conference on the Future of Europe. It should be inclusive for all institutions and citizens and the European Parliament should have a leading role. From the Commission side, Dubravka Šuica – an experienced Member of this House – will work closely with you to make this is a success.

Honourable Members,

We all know that one Member of our family intends to leave our Union.

And I have never ever made any secret about the fact that I will always be a remainder. We will respect the decision taken by the British people.

We will work closely together to find solutions to common challenges – especially on security matters. But one thing has to be absolutely clear:

Whatever the future holds, the bond and the friendship between our people are unbreakable.

Honourable Members,

In 30 years' time, others will stand here and look back at the actions of an earlier generation, just as I did at the beginning of my speech.

What will they say?

That depends on what we do together. If we do our job well, the Europe of 2050 will be the first continent in the world to be carbon neutral.

It will be a leading digital power. It will continue to be the economy that best manages to strike a balance between market forces and social concern. And it will lead the way on the great global issues.

The path is arduous, the task is not easy. But together we can do it.

Let us take inspiration from the optimistic and determined spirit of thirty years ago that brought the Iron Curtain down.

To come back to Václav Havel, millions of Europeans are taking action because it is the right thing to do.

There are those who work hard to strengthen their communities.

There are those who give their time to look after the elderly or to clean a park.

There are those who march in the streets – but also change their lifestyle to protect the climate.

People who want to make a difference.

And we too, Parliament, Council and Commission, we must make a difference.

This is the spirit in which I have formed my team, and it is in this spirit that I am standing before you today to ask for your trust.

Let's get to work, so that in 30 years' time too we can say:

Vive l'Europe, es lebe Europa, long live Europe!

